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The ISAF Withdrawal from Afghanistan: Perceptions and Reactions of Regional Powers

Sandra Destradi, Nadine Godehardt and Alexander Frank

At a conference in Tokyo on 8 July 2012, Afghanistan's donors pledged 16 billion USD in reconstruction aid over the next four years. At the NATO Summit in Chicago in May 2012, a comparable sum had been committed to supporting the Afghanistan National Security Forces (ANSF).

Analysis

The international community is anxious to reassure the Afghan government that it will not be left to fend for itself after the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops are withdrawn at the end of 2014. Nevertheless, the fear remains that a power vacuum and another takeover by the Taliban could throw the country into turmoil once again.

- The destabilization of Afghanistan would most affect the neighboring countries. Yet despite sharing similar threat perceptions, these states are pursuing very different goals in Afghanistan that impede effective regional cooperation.
- The US, which would like to see its influence in Afghanistan maintained, curbs all initiatives that are not in line with its interests.
- The US is pursuing the vision of an economically integrated region in which Afghanistan will be the central stretch of a new "Silk Road" between Central and South Asia, and the Middle East and East Asia. The implicit notion is that economic integration will lead to increased stability in the security sector, but at best, that would only be attainable in the long term. In the short term, it is more likely that political differences between the regional states will hinder economic cooperation.
- China and India are aiming to more closely incorporate Afghanistan in regional organizations within their own spheres of influence. Both nations fear a post-2014 destabilization of Afghanistan that would directly affect their security – especially through the strengthening of Islamist terror groups.
- Other states are also concerned about the developments in Afghanistan. Iran, for example, is pursuing an ambivalent policy, fearing both the continuation of American influence after 2014 and a Taliban takeover.

Keywords: Afghanistan, India, USA, PR China, Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The Impact of the NATO Troops' Withdrawal from Afghanistan

On 8 July 2012, at a conference in Tokyo, some 60 donor countries pledged to support Afghanistan over the next four years with 16 billion USD in reconstruction aid, which is tied to conditions. The Afghan government has committed itself to holding free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections in 2014 and 2015, to improving financial supervision and governance, and to more effectively fighting the rampant corruption. At the NATO Summit in Chicago in May 2012, a comparatively high sum was agreed for supporting the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Through these financial pledges, the international community seeks to prevent Afghanistan sinking into chaos after withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in 2014. They are also intended to signal to President Hamid Karzai's government that the international community will continue to support Afghanistan after 2014. The "strategic partnership" agreement between the US and Afghanistan that was signed in May 2012 also serves this purpose. In addition, in July 2012, Afghanistan was declared a "major non-NATO ally" of the US – which should facilitate its access to weapons and military equipment. While the US is attempting to demonstrate its continued commitment to Afghanistan, it is also trying to delegate as much responsibility as possible to other actors. Concurrently, there is repeated talk of the need for "regional solutions:" states in Afghanistan's immediate vicinity should increasingly be involved in efforts to stabilize the country and, to this end, should act cooperatively and increasingly independently. This particularly concerns states that would be most affected by the possible destabilization of Afghanistan and the return of the Taliban to power.

The withdrawal of all NATO combat troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014 was decided at the International Conference on Afghanistan in Bonn in December 2011, where it was also stipulated that once the international forces were withdrawn, full responsibility for security policy would be handed to the ANSF. Linked to vague pledges about a continued presence of NATO contingents in the country and efforts to find a regional solution to the conflict, this withdrawal plan was presented as the basis for creating a stable Afghanistan.

Today, however, the reality looks quite different. The ANSF are not yet adequately equipped and trained to tend to security and stability throughout the country. The continued presence of Taliban groups that are capable of exercising force is indicated by incidents like the attack and hostage taking at a luxury hotel at Qarga Lake near Kabul in June 2012. Added to this is the fact that it is still unclear how many ISAF troops – with which tasks – will remain in the country after 2014. Plans for early withdrawals, like those announced by newly elected French president François Hollande at the NATO Summit in Chicago in May 2012, increasingly unnerve the allies. Furthermore, because of the serious conflicts of interest of all the actors, the effective transfer of responsibility to regional actors or even a resolution to regional conflicts like the US is hoping for could at best be achieved in the long run. Meanwhile, disagreements between the Karzai government, Pakistan and NATO are becoming ever clearer. It is doubtful whether it will be possible to ensure a stable Afghanistan after 2014 – the goal set by the Afghanistan Conference in Bonn. The developments in Afghanistan are being critically monitored by regional powers such as India, Iran, China, and Afghanistan's neighboring states in Central Asia. It is these states that will be directly affected by changes in US strategy and the withdrawal of Western powers from Afghanistan in the coming years.

The Change in US Foreign Policy and Strategy for Afghanistan

The ISAF troop withdrawal and the beginning of a so-called "Transformation Phase" in Afghanistan in 2014 are part of a fundamentally different American foreign and security policy. Substantially determined by Barack Obama's election to the US presidency, this change was accelerated by a series of other factors, most importantly, the economic and financial crisis. Since President Obama took office in January 2009, economic consolidation, military caution and efforts to spread responsibility for security policy among regional allies have been central to US policy. So, for example, in 2011, all combat troops were withdrawn from Iraq, and that same year military authority for the NATO operation in Libya was left to the allies.

The change in US foreign and security policy is especially obvious in regard to the conflict in Afghanistan. In a speech at the United States Military Academy at West Point in December 2009, President Obama announced a gradual drawdown of US troops starting in 2011. Then, at the International Conference on Afghanistan held in London in January 2010, the international community generally adopted these withdrawal plans. The core of the new approach was the beginning of a new “counterinsurgency” strategy (stationing an additional 38,000 soldiers to fight the Taliban and Al Qaeda in the region bordering Pakistan), a vague formulation about handing over security responsibilities from the ISAF to the ANSF starting in winter 2010/11 (“transition phase”), and the reintegration of players who are ready to renounce violence – a euphemism for negotiating with moderate members of the Taliban. In addition, at the London Conference Afghanistan’s potential to serve as a “land-bridge” between various regions – South and Central Asia, the Near East and East Asia – was pointed out and the need to seek a regional solution to the conflict was emphasized. The route chosen in London was followed in the following years. In a speech in June 2011, President Obama confirmed the drawdown of 10,000 American soldiers by the end of 2011 and the withdrawal of another 33,000 soldiers by summer 2012. The transfer of security responsibilities from the ISAF to the ANSF should be complete by 2014.

A “Regional Solution” for Afghanistan?

Efforts to find a “regional solution” for the conflict in Afghanistan translated into a meeting of regional actors in Istanbul in November 2011 at an Afghanistan conference that was chaired by Turkey, where the Central Asian states, China, Iran, India and Pakistan discussed the future of Afghanistan. Although the US and other “Western” states did not participate in the conference, to a certain degree, it was a result of the change in the US strategy for Afghanistan. The US itself is increasingly focusing on a region that is referred to as “Greater Central Asia” or the “Heart of Asia.” This is based on the conviction that in Central Asia, which is generally cut off from the world market, only transregional economic integration and cooperation will be able to provide prosperity and stability, prevent extremism and also overcome the dis-

agreements between the various states. For some years, the idea of a “New Silk Route” initiative – reviving the old trade routes of the Silk Road – has been central to the American discourse. With copper, rare earth metals and other resources, Afghanistan would be an appropriate production site, as well as an infrastructure node and a transport hub between the various regions. Just as the old Silk Road did not just connect East and West, but also ran along a North–South axis, the New Silk Road would benefit from Afghanistan’s position between Central and South Asia and the Middle and Far East. Extensive foreign investment in infrastructure projects, as well as the lowered trade barriers that are provided for in the Afghanistan–Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA), should ensure the economic growth that is needed. According to the Communiqué of the London Conference, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA) and the Istanbul Process¹ are all suited to serve as cooperation fora. Although closer economic integration of the region around Afghanistan could have a stabilizing effect in the long term, it is difficult to imagine the regional players cooperating in the short- or mid-term to try to solve the conflict in Afghanistan. Most observers agree that the strongly divergent – and partly completely opposing – security interests pursued by Afghanistan’s neighbors make efficient intermediate-term cooperation impossible (Tellis 2010; Berg Harpviken 2010). This is shown not just by the meager results of the Istanbul Process, but also by the stalling of projects that involve the regional economy, such as the TAPI gas pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan into Pakistan and then India, or the Central Asia–South Asia Regional Electricity Market (CASA–1000).

1 The Istanbul Process, named after the conference cited above, refers to the regional players’ dialogue regarding the situation in Afghanistan. In June 2012, representatives from all of Afghanistan’s neighboring countries and international and regional organizations took part in a follow-up conference in Kabul titled “Heart of Asia,” which was also attended by 15 observer states (including Germany and the US).

The Positions of Regional Players

China and the SCO

Since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, relations between China and Afghanistan have been revived through the reopening of the Chinese embassy in Kabul in 2002, and China's increased economic investment. China's interest in Afghanistan became crystal clear when China made the largest direct foreign investment in the history of Afghanistan. In spring 2008, the Chinese were able to conclude a contract worth 3.5 billion USD to develop the Aynak copper mine in Logar province. The 28-km² mining license area is believed to contain copper worth 88 billion USD. In return for the prospecting rights, the Chinese investors have committed themselves to building a coal-fired power plant, a freight railway line from the Chinese province Xinjiang through Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan, and a mosque.

China's growing interest in Afghanistan is connected to its goal of developing its western – economically weaker – provinces. In order to develop, these provinces need access to raw materials and new trade routes, which is why China's government is striving to tie them more closely to Central and South Asia, as well as to Iran. This goal is also clearly emphasized in the 12th Five-Year Plan (2011–2015).² Because of its numerous investments in Afghanistan, China has a special interest in the country's stability, most importantly regarding the security of its extensive investment services as well as the on-site Chinese workers.

Besides these economic aspects, regional security in and around Afghanistan is important to China's government for another reason – the constant fear of unrest in the Chinese province of Xinjiang that borders Afghanistan, as well as in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The Chinese leadership's concern about the future of Afghanistan after 2014 and interest in promoting stability for the entire region was stimulated by two events, the first of which was violent clashes between the Uighur minority and the Han population in Urumqi in July 2009. The riots were the most bru-

tal and the most serious in the autonomous region of Xinjiang since 1949. Behind the unrest was an incident in a toy factory in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong (Godehardt 2009). The uprising in Urumqi brought home to the Chinese government the fragility of Uighur–Han relations in Xinjiang. The smallest tremor within or – more importantly, with an eye to Afghanistan – outside China could have direct consequences for Xinjiang's stability.

The extremely brutal disputes between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010 are considered to be the second event that increased Chinese government concern about Afghanistan's future. In this context, Chinese experts were mostly shocked by how Otunbayeva's interim government temporarily lost control of the south of the country. It also became clear that there is no possibility of effectively containing the repercussions of such a crisis within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Chinese experts repeatedly emphasized that, in view of the situation in Afghanistan, this was a shortcoming of the SCO.

These two events, as well as the scheduled drawdown of ISAF troops by the end of 2014 have led China's government to more actively seek to integrate Afghanistan both regionally and bilaterally. To this end, at the latest SCO Summit in Beijing in early June 2012, Afghanistan was accorded the observer status that Afghan president Karzai had sought since 2011. Even if this was a largely symbolic gesture, it still makes plain that the states that border Afghanistan want to assume greater responsibility, and it is also a first important and logical step to further incorporating Afghanistan into the SCO. After all, a SCO–Afghanistan Contact Group that focuses on the illegal drug trade from Afghanistan to Central Asia and Xinjiang province has existed since 2005, and in 2009 an SCO–Afghanistan Action Plan to combat terrorism, illicit drug trafficking and organized crime was agreed. The Chinese suspect that Uighur terrorists were partly trained in Afghanistan. Following the SCO Summit in Beijing in June 2012, Karzai and Chinese president Hu Jintao upgraded the relations between Afghanistan and China by signing a “strategic partnership.” This agreement testifies to China's wish to make a long-term commitment in and for Afghanistan. Hu additionally emphasized that the Chinese government would encourage Chinese companies to invest in Afghani-

² China's investments in the port of Gwadar, Pakistan, the extension of the oil pipeline between Kazakhstan and the Chinese province of Xinjiang, the construction of the Turkmenistan–Xinjiang gas pipeline, as well as the conclusion of a 25-year energy contract between China and Iran are included in the plan.

stan, and would be actively engaged in maintaining regional security.

The Chinese government has recognized that the future of Afghanistan will impact the entire region, including the western Chinese province of Xinjiang. For that reason, China's interest in the stability of Afghanistan should be taken quite seriously. However, it remains to be seen whether the Chinese government is ready to assume more responsibility for reconstructing Afghanistan besides making direct investments, and what role the SCO could really play. The SCO's possibilities will be particularly limited by the fact that neither China nor Russia is interested in American participation (for example, as an observer state) in the SCO. But it is precisely the exclusion of the US and other European players that creates misgivings on the part of the Americans with regard to the SCO's direction as a regional organization in view of the developments in Afghanistan.

India

India, too, is following NATO's plans for withdrawing from Afghanistan with great concern because a post-2014 destabilization of the country would immediately threaten its security. On the one hand, the Indian government fears its arch rival Pakistan's increased influence on Afghanistan. Pakistan's security doctrine views Afghanistan as a strategic area for retreat in case of a war with India, and Islamabad is clearly striving to exert more influence in Kabul. On the other hand, New Delhi sees the danger of a destabilized Afghanistan or the Taliban's return to power as being accompanied by the strengthening of terror networks in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The November 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai by members of the Pakistan-based group Lashkar-e-Taiba demonstrated India's vulnerability to Islamist terrorists. Against this background, the announcement of the ISAF troops' drawdown triggered a lively debate among India's security policy elites about the possibilities and limits of India's commitment to Afghanistan.

After the fall of the Taliban, India began to participate in the reconstruction of Afghanistan; its pledge of 2 billion USD made it the fifth-largest donor country (Ganguly 2012: 4). Construction of the Afghan Parliament building and the highway between Zaranj and Delaram that connects

southwest Afghanistan to the Iranian border are just two of India's prestigious projects in Afghanistan. New Delhi has also committed itself to many smaller development projects, for example, in the health sector, and annually offers 500 scholarships for Afghan students. As a result, India enjoys a certain benevolence on the part of the Afghan population, and the fact that President Karzai studied in India contributes to the Afghan government's sympathetic view of India.

For a long time, India tried to strictly limit its commitment in Afghanistan to reconstruction and development cooperation. The only tentative exception was Afghan membership in SAARC, which represents India's effort to incorporate Afghanistan into the region of South Asia. India's general reticence regarding Afghanistan reflected New Delhi's regional policy of nonintervention, and can also be traced to the USA's wish to check Pakistani-Indian competition for influence in Afghanistan (Ganguly 2012: 3). Pakistan fears that increased Indian influence in Afghanistan could result in its "encirclement" by enemy states, and it is exerting significant pressure on the US to prevent stepped-up Indian involvement in the country.

However, since 2011 it has been possible to observe signs of change in India's Afghanistan policy, with the two countries signing an agreement for a strategic partnership in October of that year which was Afghanistan's first such agreement. In it, India declares its readiness to train and equip Afghan security forces. This change in the Indian policy on Afghanistan was largely possible only after relations between the US and Pakistan had deteriorated in the wake of the killing of Osama Bin Laden on Pakistani territory in May 2011. In the recent past, the US has repeatedly supported India's increased engagement in Afghanistan. So, for example, in June 2012 Indian external affairs minister S.M. Krishna and the American secretary of state Hillary Clinton agreed to hold a trilateral dialogue with the Afghan government. Despite the USA's willingness to grant India a larger role in Afghanistan's future, active military engagement by India in Afghanistan remains most unlikely. Besides, it is difficult to imagine that India really will become a driving force for a "regional solution" to stabilize Afghanistan. On the one hand, such a prominent Indian role would be met with great resistance by Pakistan – and in spite of the estrangement between Washington and Islam-

abad, the US would hardly be ready to completely end its cooperation with Pakistan. Moreover, India is still wrangling with the question of playing a more proactive role in the region. The principles of sovereignty and nonintervention remain deeply rooted in India's foreign policy, and the fear of encountering resistance in the region will continue to prevent the Indian government from taking a leading role in the stabilization of Afghanistan.

Other Actors

Besides China, the Central Asian states, India and Pakistan, there are other actors that are also interested in how Afghanistan develops. These include Iran and Turkey. Because of the flood of refugees and the drug trafficking from Afghanistan, Iran is directly affected by its neighbor's security situation. Iran has always been involved in Afghanistan's politics because of ethnic and religious affiliations. For example, Iran supported – with India – the Northern Alliance against the Taliban (who were supported by Pakistan) in the Afghan Civil War in the 1990s. The drawdown of ISAF troops has triggered contradictory reactions in Iran: on the one hand the withdrawal of its arch enemy, the US, from the immediate vicinity is welcomed, while on the other hand a possible strengthening of the Taliban is hardly in Iran's interest. Teheran's policy on Afghanistan is accordingly inconsistent: there are reports about Iran delivering weapons to the Taliban with the aim of weakening the US in Afghanistan, but Iran also continues to support Shiite groups that are hostile to the Taliban. Such politics hardly make Iran a reliable partner for stabilizing Afghanistan – and the US alone has no chance of winning over Iran as a supporter of its transition plans for Afghanistan. The Iranian leadership reacted very angrily to the signing of a strategic partnership agreement between the US and Afghanistan in May 2012, and even threatened to expel a million Afghan refugees. Beyond that, Teheran is actively seeking to make use of its own "soft power" in Afghanistan in order to be better able to fill a possible power vacuum after the ISAF troops have left. A third of Afghanistan's media are supported by Iran, both financially and in terms of content, and in 2010 Teheran invested 500 million USD in reconstructing Afghanistan – mostly in projects such as building Shiite schools (Ferris-Rotman 2012).

A more constructive contribution to stabilizing Afghanistan can be expected from Turkey. As host of the Istanbul Conference in 2011, Turkey made a name for itself as a driving force in the effort to seek a regional solution. By virtue of its membership in NATO and its good relations with Pakistan, and in view of the AKP government's active foreign policy, Turkey has the potential to become an important player in Afghanistan. One such instance is Turkey's insistence on Pakistan's participation at the NATO summit in Chicago, after Pakistan had closed the supply route on its territory to NATO forces in the wake of a military strike by the US. Evidence of Turkey's increasing involvement in the region around Afghanistan is also shown by it being granted the status of SCO dialogue partner in June 2012.

Conclusion

The next two and a half years will be decisive for Afghanistan's future, with the US and its Western allies banking on a combination of financial assistance, the presence of a smaller military contingent in the country, a political dialogue within Afghanistan and the growing assumption of responsibility by regional actors. However, this last aspect is turning out to be especially problematic because of the different interests of the various players. Although countries like India or Turkey are capable of building bridges between the US and other regional actors, the regional actors remain very divided. For this reason there will probably be no regional solution for Afghanistan; instead, the danger exists that in the years after 2014 Afghanistan will again become the theater of proxy conflicts between external – particularly regional – powers.

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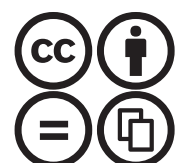
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